

CONSUMER PREFERENCES EXPRESSED VIA SHOPPING IN ALTERNATIVE FOOD CHAINS

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Abstract

MIŠKOLCI SIMONA. 2017. Consumer Preferences Expressed via Shopping in Alternative Food Chains. *Acta Universitatis Agriculturae et Silviculturae Mendelianae Brunensis*, 65(1): 0311–0318.

In recent years an increasing consumer interest in shopping in alternative food chains can be observed also in the Czech Republic. For the successful development of alternative food networks, it is important to understand what motivates consumers to shop there. This paper is aimed to define and discuss the key aspects of the preference determinants of AFN shoppers. The empirical analysis was conducted on 333 shoppers at two alternative food chains in Brno, Czech Republic. The consumer survey was designed to examine cognitive, normative and affective determinants of preference for purchased food. First findings confirm, that by the shopping at alternative food chains consumers demonstrate preferences not only for fresh and tasty food, but also their normative position of willingness to support local production and community.

Keywords: alternative food chains, customer motives, preference determinants, credence characteristics

INTRODUCTION

During the last decades, processes of globalization, the industrialization of production, and economic concentration in the processing industry and retail sectors have led to significant changes in food production and consumption patterns and its social contexts. While in the traditional agro-food systems both food production and consumption took place within a location-specific set of biophysical and cultural conditions, in global food systems are becoming spatially and culturally independent. The global food system is characterized according to Norberg-Hodge *et al.* (2002) by large scale, highly mechanized, monoculture and chemically intensive methods of production oriented to the remote and increasingly globalized markets. The direct link between producers and consumers vanished and consumers are increasingly uncertain and critical about the quality and safety of their food and sustainability of food production. In response to the economic, environmental and social aspects of

global food system are no longer meeting the goals and values of many consumers, there has been a development and grown in the number and kinds of new local food networks, that are characterized by notions of re-localization, embeddedness, and a turn to quality (Renting *et al.* 2003; Watts *et al.* 2005); and that aim to benefit local economies, community and environments (Marsden and Smith 2005, Seyfang 2008). According to many authors (Marsden *et al.* 2000; Lang 2010; Van der Ploeg 2006; Roep and Wiskerke 2007) a growing number and popularity of alternative food systems and local producer / consumer networks can be generally understood as a part of a wider social movement countering the various unsustainabilities evoked by prevailing food regimes of global systems of food provision. Moreover Kirwan (2004) specifies that alternative food networks (AFNs) distinguish themselves from the global food regimes by building new producer-consumer alliances and creating experimental spaces to develop novel practices of food provision that are more in tune with their values, norms,

needs, and desires, that built on the reproduction and re-valuation of local sources, and that result in food of distinct and better appreciated qualities.

Although the dynamic of AFN development in the Czech Republic essentially followed the patterns already known from Western Europe, there are some specific features already described in literature. One of the first study of AFNs in the Czech Republic (Zagata 2012) provides overview of the alternative food initiatives and points to an increasing role of consumers in the emerging transition process of agri-food regimes. Thus the current debate about development of alternative food networks needs the consumer behavioral perspective as one of the points of departure. Zagata (2012) notes also specific role of civic organization in the Czech context, which together with authorities acted as the catalyst for the AFNs development. Most research has been recently done to study the emerging models of AFN such as farmers' markets (Spilková *et al.* 2013, Spilková and Perlín 2013), community-supported agriculture (Asfourová *et al.* 2015) and farm boxes (Konečný *et al.* 2016). In order to perceive added value from a local food a better understanding of the values, norms, needs and, motives as a determinants of consumer's choice at the alternative food networks is steel needed.

The goal of this paper is to define and discuss some of the key aspects of the preference determinants of shoppers in the stores of alternative food chains. The first section defines the key concepts of consumer preference determinants in AFN. Given the limited scope of this paper, the research questions are focused on selected preference determinants, that are important to understand what motivates consumers to shop in alternative food chains.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The evaluation of price-quality ratio plays a major role for consumers in determining food purchases. Thus for local food initiatives it is important to understand the determinants of preferences for regional food, in order to be able to support and develop novel products and food provision practices that can better meet the requirements of local consumers, and can help to promote locally grown products more successfully.

Many surveys have already attempted to identify a consumer segment with preferences for shopping in AFN. Hanseleit *et al.* (2007) in their review of causal analytical studies concluded that in nearly all of the studies the focus was either on psychographic factors (such as food quality and safety; the awareness of health and nutrition as well as environmental concerns and the willingness to support the local economy are supposed to take influence on the preference for regional food); or socio-demographic factors (age, sex, class of income, education and the number of children in

the household etc.). The main point of their criticism on all of the reviewed studies is, that they do not consider the full range of possible determinants.

The consumer food choice process can be generally explained as a complex utility function of (1) experience (intrinsic) attributes such as freshness, taste, visual appeal, package, etc., and (2) credence (extrinsic) attributes related to nutritional value, places and methods of production, use of certain substances, environmental impact and, in a broad sense, the level of safety and local community effects associated with the product. Several studies (Moser *et al.* 2011, Miškolci 2011, Frýdlova and Vostrá 2011, Grunert 2005, Deliza and MacFie 1996) confirm that in many developed countries consumers' food choices are increasingly influenced by credence determinants, which are difficult or impossible to detect, both before and after the purchase. AFN seek to give clear signals as to the credence characteristics of the food product that can help to transform credence characteristics into search attributes, thereby enabling buyers to better communicate preferences via markets. Moreover, if the credence or embedded information provided to consumers is considered valuable, the successful translation of this information allows products to be differentiated from more anonymous commodities and potentially to gain a premium price. Thus intangible credence characteristics represents new sources of value added that can be captured locally by AFN.

Despite of growing number of important research studies of shoppers' perceived embeddedness at farmers' markets (Cassia *et al.* 2012, Spilková *et al.* 2013, Spilková and Perlín 2013, Chen 2013, Feagan and Morris 2009), Chen and Scott (2014) identified a lack of consistency in investigation of perceived benefits derived from an intangible credence factors of perception of social, spatial and natural embeddedness. To give an overview about the plurality of possible factors influencing the preference for regional Hanseleit *et al.* (2007) applied the theoretical framework proposed by Obermiller and Spangenberg (1989) to explain the preferences for local food. According to this concept, the investigated determinants of consumer preferences for local food are grouped into following overlapping and interdependent categories:

- *uncertainty about food quality and safety*: cognitive factors (geographical origin might be used as a quality cue by consumers who are unsure about the quality of a product, region of origin is a "signal" for the general product quality, regional food is perceived to be fresher, healthier and more environment-friendly);
- *consumer ethnocentrism/patriotism*: normative factors (preference for regional food is influenced by beliefs consumers hold about the moral appropriateness to favor domestic products, therefore, consumers feel constrained to support the local economy and environment by their selective purchase decision);

- *contact-affect phenomenon*: affective factors (ethnocentric and patriotic norms might also be influenced by emotional aspects; pride of and sympathy to the own region may be transferred directly to the product and leads to a positive bias in the perception of the product and its attributes; the pure contact to an object leads to familiarity and finally to sympathy to the object).

The main objective of presented study is to elaborate and to quantify the determining factors of consumers' preferences for food in AFN. There are various methods to determine attribute (criteria) importance weights, which can be classified in different ways: algebraic or statistical, decomposed or holistic, direct or indirect, and compensatory or non-compensatory. Holistic and indirect procedure used here requires respondents to rate the different attributes according to their preference importance. The empirical analysis was conducted on shoppers at two alternative food chains in Brno, Czech Republic: (1) *Náš Grunt* (established in 2010, one of the most important farm food retailer in the Czech Republic, about 30 outlets have been opened during last 6 years of its existence in the Czech Republic); and (2) *My Food Market*, established in 2013, one of the most important high quality food retailer in Brno (4 specialized outlets in Brno, 1 in Prague). The data came from two surveys, which was conducted in stores of the retail chains in Brno during 2015: *My Food* (Skalický, 2015) and *Náš Grunt* (Strmisková, 2015). The draft survey was pre-tested with 8 shoppers and staff at *My Food* and with 21 respondents of *Náš Grunt*. After completing the questionnaire, respondents were asked to provide their comments to the questions and content of questionnaire. On the basis of their comments, the determinants of consumer preferences measurement were refined. Altogether 333 consumers answered the questionnaire (the overall response rate was 82%). Data were summarized and tabulated using descriptive statistics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Within the questionnaire, the importance of determining factors of consumers' preferences for regional food in AFN was measured on a Likert Scale where 1 stands for "I totally agree with the statement" and 5 refers to "I do not agree at all". In order calculate normalized weight of factors average importance, the points were allocated for each statement - 5 points for "I totally agree with the statement, that this factor is important for my purchase decision" and 1 point "I do not agree at all". From total value of indicated importance, the average importance score (z_i), and then weights (w_i) for each item and category were calculated.

$$w_i^{(N)} = \frac{z_i}{\sum_i z_i}$$

The top-level ordering of preference determinants is given by the weighted average of all the preference scores. Obtained results are presented in Tab I.

Results of consumer preference determinants analysis indicate that investigated normative factors are the most important category of determinant of preference in alternative food chains. The average importance indicated by respondents (4 from maximum 5 points) was the highest in comparison with average importance of other investigated groups of determinants (cognitive 3.7 and affective 3.6). However, the dispersion of the responses in the categories was rather uneven. This can be caused by so called "warm-glow effect", that specifies the moral satisfaction of their behavior. It represents the feeling of consumers of being a good citizen rather than evaluation of local product itself (Vatn 2005). Thus, social norms may strongly influence the purchase intension in AFN independent of cognitive and affective processes directly. In order to perceive added value from a local food delivered by AFN, consumers should be educated to recognize a problem with local food production and become involved with the local community welfare issue. Consequently, affective factors such as sympathy to the regional producers and community, with the relatively lowest average importance indicated by respondents (3.6 points from 5), can be also regarded as an important determinant of consumer preference in AFN, because this sympathy to the own region can be directly transferred to the food product. Consumers' perceptions of product quality and food safety belong to this group of psychographic factors for preferences towards regional food. Average importance of this group of factors derived from the statements of respondents is also relatively high (3.7). The highest differences between indicated importance of investigated factors can be observed in this group of cognitive factors: from 2.3 points for the factor of lowest price to 4.8 points for the confidence in the quality and freshness and taste of purchased food). Here it is worth pointing out that inclusion of factors with low significance into set of investigated attributes may contribute to reducing the average assessment of this group of determinants. For the purpose of revealing the most important determinants of consumer a preference in AFN, the preference order of evaluated factors was derived (Tab II) from the relative normalized weights of each factor. These weights were calculated to enable to use results of investigation for MultiCriteria Analysis (MCA), that represents structured approach used to determine overall preferences among alternative options in the process of further AFN development.

I: Perceived importance and normalized weigh of preference determinants in AFN

Determinants of consumer preferences		Náš Grunt (N = 212)		My Food (N = 121)		Total sample (N = 333)		
		Average import.	Weigh	Average import.	Weigh	Average import.	Weigh	
Cognitive factors	Product perception	Confidence in the quality and freshness	4.80	0.0494	4.84	0.0493	4.82	0.0494
		Taste	4.79	0.0493	4.78	0.0486	4.79	0.0491
		Way of serving and store's environment.	4.54	0.0467	4.30	0.0437	4.46	0.0457
		Origin of food (country of origin)	4.22	0.0435	4.08	0.0415	4.17	0.0428
		Durability, usability	3.11	0.0320	3.46	0.0352	3.24	0.0332
		Package size	2.90	0.0298	2.75	0.0280	2.84	0.0291
		Discount, special offer	2.80	0.0288	2.68	0.0272	2.75	0.0282
		Attractive and handy packaging	2.50	0.0257	2.76	0.0281	2.59	0.0266
		The lowest price of product	2.30	0.0237	2.27	0.0231	2.29	0.0235
	Food safety	The quality of the raw materials used in the production	4.63	0.0477	4.78	0.0486	4.68	0.0480
		Composition of the product	4.61	0.0474	4.61	0.0469	4.61	0.0472
		The content of additives	3.53	0.0364	4.23	0.0431	3.79	0.0388
		Nutritional value of food	3.42	0.0352	3.64	0.0371	3.50	0.0359
		Environmentally friendly	3.82	0.0393	3.84	0.0391	3.83	0.0393
		The product from organic production	2.88	0.0296	3.09	0.0315	2.95	0.0303
Guaranteed origin information		3.76	0.0387	4.33	0.0441	3.94	0.0404	
Mark of product or manufacturer		3.58	0.0368	3.14	0.0320	3.42	0.0350	
Normative	Consumer ethnocentrism/patriotism	Dissatisfaction with current quality of food chains	4.41	0.0453	4.06	0.0413	4.28	0.0439
		Getting more information about the properties and methods of production of food consumed.	3.86	0.0397	3.77	0.0384	3.83	0.0393
		Ensuring a high freshness of product	4.38	0.0451	4.43	0.0451	4.40	0.0451
		Opportunity to support local environment.	3.72	0.0383	4.02	0.0409	3.83	0.0392
		Opportunity to support local economy	3.68	0.0379	4.02	0.0409	3.80	0.0390
		Opportunity to encourage the specific farmer	4.01	0.0413	3.45	0.0352	3.84	0.0394
Affective	Contact-affect sympathy	Sympathy to the community of responsible consumers	3.75	0.0386	3.45	0.0352	3.64	0.0373
		Sympathy to the community of local producers and consumers of food	3.62	0.0372	4.02	0.0409	3.76	0.0386
		Sympathy to the story and personality of farmers	3.54	0.0364	3.45	0.0352	3.51	0.0360

II: Ordering of preference determinants

Order	Determinants of consumer preferences	Average importance (N=333)	Weight
1	Confidence in the quality and freshness	4.8168	0.0494
2	Taste	4.7868	0.0491
3	The quality of the raw materials used in the production	4.6847	0.0480
4	Composition of the product	4.6096	0.0472
5	Way of serving and store's environment	4.4634	0.0457
6	Ensuring a high freshness of product	4.3964	0.0451
7	Dissatisfaction with current quality of food chains	4.2793	0.0439
8	Origin of food (country of origin)	4.1721	0.0428
9	Guaranteed origin information	3.9373	0.0404
10	Opportunity to encourage the specific farmer	3.8434	0.0394
11	Getting more information about the properties and methods of production of food consumed	3.8320	0.0393
12	Environmentally friendly	3.8303	0.0393
13	Opportunity to support local environment	3.8288	0.0392
14	Opportunity to support local economy	3.8018	0.0390
15	The content of additives	3.7868	0.0388
16	Sympathy to the community of local producers and consumers of food	3.7628	0.0386
17	Sympathy to the community of responsible consumers	3.6396	0.0373
18	Sympathy to the story and personality of farmers	3.5112	0.0360
19	Nutritional value of food	3.5000	0.0359
20	Mark of product or manufacturer	3.4192	0.0350
21	Durability, usability	3.2388	0.0332
22	The product from organic production	2.9550	0.0303
23	Package size	2.8438	0.0291
24	Discount, special offer	2.7538	0.0282
25	Attractive and handy packaging	2.5916	0.0266
26	The lowest price of product	2.2913	0.0235

The most important factors influencing the purchase of food in AFN are quality attributes – the freshness and taste. From this perspective, the geographical origin might be used as a “signal” for the general product quality by consumers who are unsure about the quality of a product. On the other hand, the low price was indicated as a factor with the lowest importance for consumers buying foods in alternative food chains.

CONCLUSION

In recent years the alternative food networks has experienced increasing popularity also in the Czech Republic. However the term AFN represents vast array of emerging food schemes and initiatives that are seeking to reconfigure producer–consumer relations and better meet consumer needs. In the Czech Republic as well as in many other European countries regional initiatives have been established to promote the sale of regional food. For the successful development of AFN it is important to understand the determinants of preferences for regional food.

Through the empirical research conducted on 333 shoppers at two alternative food chains in Brno, Czech Republic, it was confirmed, that the shoppers' preferences at the AFN are derived from cognitive, but also from normative and affective determinants. By the shopping at alternative food chains consumers demonstrate preferences not only for fresh and tasty food, but also their normative position of willingness to support local production and community. Moreover, social norms may strongly influence the purchase intention in AFN independent of cognitive and affective processes directly. Also affective factors such as sympathy to the regional producers and community can be directly transferred to the food product and become a source of value added. Via shopping in alternative food chains consumers demonstrate their preference for the non-conventional food products, different from the quality provided by the conventional food chains. Customers of alternative food chain differ from those consumers shopping in conventional outlets by the higher emphasis placed on quality and willingness to pay price premium for higher quality. From the comparison of stated importance of attributes determining food choice preferences (FOCUS survey 2013) we can see, that the low price and especially the various discount events are the most important factors for the respondents of conventional food chains and less important for respondents shopping in alternative food chains. Marketing strategy of the AFN shops should thus accentuate product-based quality, because consumers are mostly interested in the freshness and taste of product (wider assortment, new recipes, convenience). Emphasis should be also placed on the process-oriented quality, especially on origin of the product and impact on human, environment and local community (healthy regional products, support of local farmers and economy). Reported findings indicate the lower importance of organic production for the customers of farmers' shop in comparison with other AFN consumers (for example farm box schemes). However, the high quality, region specific or organic foods may emerge from both conventional and alternative food chains. Limited local supply and commercialization of AFN could lead to risks of decreasing perceived product and process quality, that could undermine the competitive advantage and sustainability of alternative food chains. Thus the innovation in area of food production, delivery and consumption can be seen as a main source of their sustainability. From this point of view AFN shops should create new experiences for consumers as a source of perceived food quality and value added.

SUMMARY

This article is aimed to contribute to the discussion about the development of an alternative food network in the Czech Republic. AFNs represent new producers-consumer alliances and create experimental spaces to develop novel practices of food provision that can better meet values, norms, needs, and desires of consumers than global food provision systems. In order to take advantage of the potential AFNs for the sustainable development of regions, it is necessary to understand the determinants of consumer preferences for local food. Presented study examine cognitive, normative and affective determinants of preference for local food in order to help to promote locally grown products more successful. The importance of investigated preference determinants was evaluated using data generated from 333 respondents of two alternative food chains in Brno. Via shopping in alternative food chains consumer express preferences for those qualities embed in food, that are not delivered by conventional food regime. Results of consumer preference determinants analysis indicate that the most important is category of consumer preference determinants in alternative food chains is normative, followed by cognitive and affective. By the shopping at alternative food chains consumers demonstrate preferences not only for fresh and tasty food, but also their normative position of willingness to support local production and community. Moreover, social norms may strongly influence the purchase intention in AFN independent of cognitive and affective processes directly. Also affective factors such as sympathy to the regional producers and community can be directly transferred to the food product and become a source of value added. On the other hand, the low price was indicated as a factor with the lower importance for consumers buying foods in alternative food chains than those shopping in conventional food chains. To ensure sustainability, marketing strategy of the AFN shops should thus accentuate product-based quality (wider assortment, new recipes, convenience). Emphasis should be also placed on the process-

oriented quality, especially on origin of the product and impact on human, environment and local community. AFN shops should create new experiences for consumers via innovation in area of food production, delivery.

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